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ABSTRACT

A researcher's experiences in providing technical support to 10 schools involved in evaluation of their school-based management programs is provided in this report. Methodology involved principal interviews, attitudinal staff surveys, and school self-evaluations of the 10 participating schools. Recommendations for improving the self-evaluation process include staff training, adaptation to job turnover, scheduled evaluation times, and consideration of the feasibility of school-level evaluation. Due to problems posed by evaluation requirements and staff turnover, self-evaluation may not be practical for all schools. (LMI)

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The Provision of Technical Support for School-Based Evaluations: Three Years of Experience

presented by:

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Introduction

The 1987-88 school year brought radical changes to the Dade County Public Schools (DCPS). That year the notion of school-based management (SBM) was introduced in 33 schools. The purpose of this paper is to present this researcher's perspective in providing technical research support to ten SBM schools as they conducted evaluations of their programs. In order to do this, background information on the DCPS and the SBM program will be reviewed. A description of the evaluation process and analysis will follow.

Description

DCPS is the fourth largest school district in the nation with approximately 290 schools spread across a large metropolitan area. The system serves nearly 300,000 students from diverse ethnic groups. The system is growing by about 4% each school year.

The concept of SBM represents a diversion from the dominant model of decision making at the school level. Traditionally, such power is in the hands of the principal. SBM seeks to involve school staff in the decision making process. This is achieved primarily through the formation of a shared decision making (SDM) body. The SDM, at its most fundamental, is composed of school staff and includes teachers and counselors. Their task is to make decisions on various operational situations at the school.

The composition and nature of the SDM is dependent upon the school. In some schools, membership is comprised of representatives of the school's instructional staff. In other schools, para-professionals and ancillary staff (e.g., custodial workers and cafeteria workers) are included. At least one administrator is also included. However, whether administrative representatives have veto power on SDM decision varies. Some schools limit decisions to those that directly affect students and instruction. Other schools extend decision making to the overall budget and hiring of new staff. Variability is also seen in the names given to the SDM body. Since each school designed their own SDM, various names evolved.

The SDM, regardless of its name, seeks input from staff and plans projects that, hopefully, will have a favorable impact. These special projects form the second major ingredient in the formula that is school-based management. The number of projects at a school also varies.

The individualized approach to SBM in the school district yields even more diversity in the schools' projects. Many center on curriculum issues. Examples of this include the model used to teach Spanish and computer skills. Other projects deal with the organizational aspects of instruction such as scheduling classes in a more unified fashion, converting one teacher unit into four parttime teachers' aide's positions, and providing increased

counseling and tutoring services to students. Still, others involved physical plant renovations and an in-school television system. Thus, the underlying philosophy of the SBM program at DCPS is to let the individual school determine the exact nature and extent of their program. In this manner, creativity is fostered and the task of evaluating the program is challenged even further.

Methods and Findings

The DCPS undertook a two-tiered approach to the assessment of SBM. An overall evaluation of the SBM included interviewing the principals and an attitudinal survey to all participating instructional staff. Additionally, each school was expected to carry out an evaluation of their own SBM program. The individualized school-based evaluations prompted the need for an adaptable evaluation strategy. Thus, it was decided that school staff would conduct the actual school-based evaluations. Staff in the schools were to follow the evaluation process used by DCPS. This included devising an evaluation plan, designing the data collection instruments, analyzing the data, and writing a final report.

In order to meet their needs for technical expertise, a research consultant from the Office of Educational Accountability was assigned to each school. It was originally planned that schools would be visited approximately four times during the course of the school year. Beyond that, it was expected that there would be a certain variability in the evaluation process at each school. This proved to be a gross understatement.

In the course of providing consultation services during that first year, this researcher identified a number of major needs in relation to the evaluation process that went beyond the anticipated four visits to each school. There were five major phases of the evaluation process that school staff needed particular assistance with. They were: a) the level of research knowledge among staff (i.e., the school staff's preparedness to conduct an evaluation), b) the familiarity with the DCPS evaluation process, c) the development of the evaluation plan, d) the development of survey instruments, and e) the data analysis/report writing. Each subsequent phase was an extension of the previous one. Therefore, careful and sufficient consultation had to be provided at every step in the process.

Each phase required a specific set of technical skills. But how these were imparted was achieved by a combination of activities based upon the schools' individual needs and preferences. The most frequently used strategy by this researcher was providing instruction in a workshop format. A large amount of information could be imparted to a relatively large number of staff. Typically, handouts and examples were used to make the most of these sessions. Such measures indicate the school staffs were not well-prepared in undertaking the evaluation activity. The second most frequent type of consultation services provided by the researcher was that of reviewer/editor. Draft copies of written

materials were requested so that they could be reviewed for appropriateness, completeness, and clarity. The range of documents was wide - from narrative descriptions of the diverse SDMs and individual projects to survey instruments to final reports. This demanded a lot of patience and perseverance on the part of the school staff. After all, the first year's experience with SBM brought with it the realization that there was a lot of work involved in SBM. Thus, the reviewing process was delicate. It required trust and respect in the negotiation process that often ensued. The school, having the ultimate responsibility for this evaluation, had the final say in the reviewing process.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, informal interviewing of school staff was used as a needs assessment tool throughout the process. This flow of information served as a check on the researcher's services offered to school staff.

From the description of the evaluation process it can be seen that a significant amount of work was required for the school-based evaluations for the first year. The researcher, in the roles of consultant, reviewer and editor used an average of seven days for each school in providing the various kinds of support. That represents a fraction of the work required by the school staff to actually conduct the evaluation. So the time resources needed by each school was great. Along with the demanding workload came a good deal of frustration. To ease the strain on staff, some schools rotated staff for various segments of the evaluation process. This resulted in a discontinuity which slowed the process down even further as some consultation services had to be duplicated.

Having survived the first year of this process this researcher looked forward to the second year with the project. After all, the schools had managed to put together somewhat usable evaluations after much training. The subsequent evaluations would be easier and we could work on improving the first year's efforts with relative ease.

The first year's evaluation process had been quite formalized. Coupled with the amount of work that went into the evaluation, the evaluation requirements were streamlined. Gone was the formal evaluation plan. Instead, schools were asked to limit the evaluation to single, unified staff survey. To assist the schools even further, a generic survey form was offered to them. However, this news was not greeted with glee. Perhaps it was because the memories of the first year were still fresh in their minds.

The majority of the schools took this as an indication that the evaluation requirement could be put on the back burner. They willingly took the generic survey that was offered and in most cases simply copied it and passed it out. Rather than spending their time refining the evaluation they had started a year ago, most schools simply gave it minimal thought. Requests for meetings with the researcher dried up in these schools. When meetings did occur it was usually after the fact. By then it was too

late to make adjustments in the evaluation and the researcher was often in the position of pointing out the weaknesses in the evaluation. The care that was taken in building relationships during the first year apparently was insufficient in so far as getting the schools staff to include the consultant early on the planning of the new year's evaluation.

One major contributing factor to this situation may have been the tremendous turnover in staff involved in the evaluation component. Since the evaluation took up so much time and energy in the first year there was significant burnout among school staff. And this situation led to sharing the workload by brining new people in. In a sense it was like starting from scratch with the added burden of a bad reputation. New faces in the schools had not attended the workshops of the first year. Their were new relationships to be forged. In addition, there was a tremendous turnover of leadership in the schools. In fact, by the end of the first three years only one school did not change principals. Of the nine new principals only three had come from SBM schools. With all the energy SBM consumed, evaluation did not seem to be a priority with the new principals either.

What resulted from these second generation evaluations was often disappointing. School staff found that there was little useful information generated from the use of the generic surveys. Report writing became a much more difficult task when there was little to say and even less to draw conclusions on.

Contrary to this trend were the few schools who caught on to the benefits of doing a meaningful evaluation. One school in particular continued the high utilization of the researcher to improve their school's evaluation. This school insisted on developing their own staff and parent surveys. They even found a way to put some evaluation findings into the school's annual report. In a climate of mutual respect the relationship with the technical consultant was fostered. In fact, when the SDM at this school decided it was time to write a document outlining the SDM they sought assistance from the researcher. It was very gratifying to see that the relationship building efforts were so handsomely rewarded.

Summary

This researcher's experience in providing technical consultation with 10 school-based management yielded some very interesting observations which might be of use to other school systems planning to evaluate their programs.

1) While it made sense for schools to carry out their own evaluations it must be emphasized that schools are in a naturally poor position to do this. School staff are not educated or experienced in program evaluation. In order to be able to conduct meaningful evaluations, school staff need tremendous training. Ideally, this training should begin before the task of evaluation is at hand.

2) The training needs of the school staff become more complex as staff are changed and rotated. There was tremendous turnover in both the leadership of the schools and the staff assigned to work on the evaluation.

3) A meaningful evaluation required time and dedication. On the whole, school staffs had neither of these two commodities. Work was done on the evaluations "on the run", between classes and during planning times. Adjustments should be made in the schedules of those working on the evaluation.

4) Careful consideration should be made of the decision to bring evaluation requirements to the school level given the significant problems posed by the evaluation requirement and staff turnover.